



MISSISSIPPI FAMILY FIRST INITIATIVE

One Year Anniversary Newsletter

July 31, 2019

Family First Initiative marks first year of work to assist struggling families

Thank you so much for being a tremendous resource through Mississippi's Family First Initiative. One year has passed since the Summit at the Westin and the creation of our effort to help stabilize families. We want to update you on all the success we have seen this past year in the eight pilot counties. We also hope that this inspires and encourages more entities to join our fight to strengthen and protect Mississippi families. We pray for blessings over you and hope to connect with all of you soon about more opportunities to serve Mississippi.

Statewide Planning

Many prevention efforts are rolling out throughout the state to help struggling families. Communities are collaborating to provide services that strengthen families. Here are some highlights from the past year:

Access to Justice

Mississippi's Family First Initiative is partnering with the Mississippi Supreme Court Access to Justice Commission to provide free legal services to families at risk of state intervention. The first program is underway in Tupelo, where on one night a month, volunteer attorneys offer their services to *pro se* clients. The Family Resource Center in Tupelo pre-screens the clients and provides space for the legal consultations.



University of Mississippi law student Grace Sullivan, at left, background, and attorney Lynne Christopher work with a client during a monthly evening *pro se* clinic in Tupelo.



"It is inspiring to see the communities wrap around our children and their families. Mississippians are loving, giving people. As we give hope to families, we change the trajectory of the family forever!"

*Associate Justice Dawn Beam
Mississippi Supreme Court*



"The progress made over the last year by the steering committees is amazing. I am encouraged to see silos broken down to help our families succeed. When we all share our resources for the betterment of the community, there is nothing we cannot accomplish."

*Mrs. Deborah Bryant
First Lady of Mississippi*

Contact Nicole McLaughlin at nmclaughlin@msbar.org for information on Lee County's program.

Needy residents of Bolivar County may receive free legal services in July through an expungement clinic coordinated by Access to Justice. Contact Pam Chatman at pchatman1@gmail.com to get involved.

Meet the Need

Another vital development in the Initiative's statewide planning process is a partnership with Meet the Need. This organization is helping the Initiative customize a web-based collaboration platform with shared case management between providers — for free. The platform is in a planning and testing phase in Rankin County. The Family First Initiative hopes to provide a more accurate reporting of services provided to families, identify gaps in services, and capture data to assist the Initiative's leadership in charting a course of action for primary prevention in Mississippi.



Testing of the Meet the Need platform is expected to be completed by December 2019 with a roll out to more counties in 2020.

Pilot County Successes

In August 2018, the Pilot County Steering Committees began to implement primary prevention programs targeting the risk factors of families in danger of entering the foster care system. Pilot counties are **Bolivar, Jackson, Lauderdale, Lee, Hinds, Madison, Rankin** and **Pearl River**. Each county went through county-wide SWOT Analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats; geo-data review and Priorities for Change Analysis; and Action Planning development.

Diverse stakeholders critically evaluated local problems. Volunteers bring experience from the **judiciary, the non-profit sector, government agencies, the faith-based community, the private business sector, health care, education**, and more.

Bolivar County

The Bolivar County Committee's priorities for change are **education, employment, transportation, substance abuse treatment, domestic violence prevention** and **crime**. Committee members are very ac-

tive in the community and have provided the area with great opportunities. Steering chair Pam Chatman connected with FedEx in Memphis, which held several job fairs. A free shuttle service was created to get workers to those new jobs. Minor



criminal records made some ineligible for jobs, so an expungement clinic is planned. A resource fair also is planned to create awareness in the community and connect needs with resources.

Jackson County

Jackson County Committee members targeted three areas: **employment, mental health treatment, and physical health care**. Members determined that a major problem is **awareness**, and identified organizations and resources. The committee, which has a large, diverse membership, is working to improve connec-

tion of these resources within the community. On April 27, 2019, they launched the first of a series of community family-focused resource fairs with more than 200 attending. The interaction helped residents learn about available services and let resource and service providers learn community needs and network with other services.

Jackson County Court and Youth Court Judge Sharon Sigalas is working on a holistic program for incarcerated parents of foster children and a program to help prepare older foster care wards for living on their own when they age out of the foster care system.



"We are letting people know we care about them. When they know we care, THEN they will reach out for help," Judge Sigalas said.

Lauderdale County



Lauderdale County Initiative members recognized **awareness, mentorship, and academic preparedness** as major challenges for children and families. The Advisory Council has appointed four steering committees to oversee actions for improvement in these areas. A Resource Committee is compiling and updating a directory of services that will be available to the public. The Mentor Program Committee is working toward programs for children and adults. Two committees will address academic challenges in third grade reading and high-school graduation.

Lee County

Lee County has created an aggressive action plan targeting **education, addiction, and poverty**.

Members worked with the Access to Justice Commission to provide free family law clinics to help prevent child removals. The committee selected the Haven Acres neighborhood and worked to build a rapport with the community. They implemented reading clubs, summer learning programs and quarterly

neighborhood events to generate resource awareness and connect needs with resources. Community members have input in planning.

Hinds County



The Hinds County Committee reviewed the Census and Child Protection Services geo-data and determined that additional input is necessary before deciding on priorities for change. Members would like as much residential involvement as possible and have started hosting meetings in local libraries and schools to generate community buy-in.

Madison County



The Madison County Steering Committee reviewed geo-data and completed a survey to identify the top four priorities for change: **poverty, crime, education and drug abuse**. Canton was identified as

having communities in highest need and the Advisory Committee made suggestions for future projects that could contribute to positive change around each of the four priorities.

The most immediate need is awareness of existing services. People often do not know where to find help, and those serving do not know what others are doing. A local web developer has agreed to build and host a website listing existing services. The site will be a point of connection for families, volunteers and organizations. The Advisory Committee hopes to promote communication and collaboration among services that ultimately impact the four priority areas for change.

A proposed integrated care pilot project would involve collaboration of Youth Court, the UMMC Initiative on Medically Assisted Treatment (MAT), the UMMC Division on Child Psychiatry, and the Family First Initiative. Dr. Beverly Bryant of UMMC, who proposed the project, said, "There is often little communication between treatment programs for adults and those for children, and even less between adult treatment programs, child protective services and the courts." The pilot project would allow parents in need of MAT to be referred by the courts or CPS to a program that also provides education regarding normal child development and effective parenting practices.

Rankin County

Committee members identified **poverty and education** as priorities for change, but are doing further assessment through community outreach events. The committee seeks to have more involvement from residents regarding their specific needs. Two locations have been identified to educate residents of existing ser-



vices and survey them for needed services. Rankin County also is testing a collaboration platform, Meet the Need. This free, online tool connects needs to resources and helps coordinate efforts around at-risk families. Rankin County celebrated the grand opening of a Families First for Mississippi resource location and partnership with Ever Reaching Community Outreach, ERCO, in Pelahatchie. Staff and volunteers assist with everything from academic and job services to furniture, food and clothing. "We are truly blessed to have folks who care about their fellow citizens and are willing to go above and beyond to help in any way possible," said Judge Thomas Broome.

Pearl River County



The Pearl River County Committee's priorities for change include **employment, housing, and poverty**. One of their first actions was to create a new position of Resource Coordinator at the Pearl River County Youth Court. Jansen Owen connects needy families to resources. The committee created and frequently updates a list of organizations and services.

Interventions range from repairs of homes to donated dental work, all of which allowed children to remain with their parents. For instance, a November 2018 storm left a father and daughter without power and unable to pay for repairs. The Family First Initiative found people willing to donate a power pole, a power box, equipment and workers to install the pole. Arrangements were made for county fees and a utility deposit to be waived.

Johns Hopkins University Public Health Fellowship Opportunities

Public health professionals working to bring about change in their communities have an opportunity to enter the Johns Hopkins University Masters of Public Health degree program. Representatives of the Bloomberg American Health Initiative visited Tupelo, Cleveland, Jackson and Hattiesburg on June 18 and 19 to recruit applicants for fully-funded fellowships. Applicants

must be employed and apply in partnership with the organizations for which they work. Selected candidates will receive a \$10,000 stipend and cost of tuition to complete a masters of public health degree. The program can be completed on campus or through distance learning. Candidates must work with their employing organization for at least a year after graduation. Applications open in August and the term starts in June 2020. For more information, contact Shane Bryan at shane.bryan@jhu.edu.

Background

In July 2018, Justice Dawn Beam and First Lady Deborah Bryant created Mississippi's Family First Initiative – an effort to bring together the often siloed child welfare state agencies and service providers to help prepare Mississippi for implementation of the Family First Prevention Services Act. The effort brings together state and community stakeholders from five different areas: the judiciary, non-profit/non-government organizations, the government, industry, and the faith-based community. The Initiative's goal through this collaborative effort is to safely reduce the number of children in state custody through holistic efforts of primary prevention.